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# Stimulating Thinking at the Design Pitch. Storytelling Approach and Impact

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**Abstract:** The relationship between design and storytelling is a growing field of research, this paper proposes that the next focus within this field should be the relationship between storytelling approaches and their impacts at the design pitch. Determined through a literature review, the following desirable impacts were used to focus conversation during a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with employees from Unilever and Accenture: 'Delivering Understanding', 'Demonstrating Value', 'Stimulating Critique', and 'Encouraging more Holistic Thinking'. Storytelling approaches and these impacts were discussed in relation to over fifty design pitches. Emergent themes were deciphered through a thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions. The impacts were found to have significant relationships with the following storytelling approaches: 'Acknowledging Cultural Perspectives and Beliefs', 'Diversity/Difference', 'Detailing Concept Development', and 'Imagery, in particular Analogy'. A summary of these relationships is detailed in a framework entitled: 'Design Pitch Storytelling: The Impact-Approach Framework'.

**Keywords:** Design Pitch, Storytelling

## 1. The Design Pitch: The Next Focus for Storytelling

The philosophy of storytelling is frequently used by researchers to develop understandings of collaborative processes, where a commonality in using storytelling to convey knowledge is broadly acknowledged (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, Davenport and Prusak, 1998, Collison and Mackenzie, 1999, McDonnell et al., 2004). However, this lens has not yet been applied to the context of the design pitch; a platform for storytelling between designer and client (Leonardi and Bailey, 2008). This paper proposes that *next*, a philosophy of storytelling should be applied to pitching design concepts, as the approach to storytelling can significantly influence the impact on its audience. In the context of this paper, a design pitch resembles the formal presentation of a concept by a designer to a client.

Before proposing a philosophy for storytelling at the design pitch, we must first establish a definition for storytelling. Many varied definitions exist for storytelling due to the plethora of circumstances in which it occurs. A universally recognised platform for storytelling is the storybook, and there are many who examine this platform in constructing understandings of storytelling (Jones, 2006, Ochoa and Osier, 1993). However, of greater relevance is psychologist Jerome Bruner's (1990) set of criteria

for an occurrence of story, derived from his theory of the narrative construction of reality. The criteria he sets out are as follows: 1) *an action directed towards goal*, 2) *an order established between events and states*, 3) *a sensitivity towards what is canonical in human interaction*, and 4) *the revealing of a narrator's perspective*. The relevance of this theoretical model becomes apparent when we relate it to a story that can be told about a design concept. For example, a story told about a concept for a new kitchen gadget could have the goal of preparing a meal more quickly. An order established between events and states could become the stages of a recipe (events) or the progress of the dish being served (states). Sensitivity towards what is canonical in human interaction is central to design as all concepts are created with a user in mind, in this instance a cook. The concept itself could be considered the perspective of the designer - their unique interpretation of the kitchen gadget.

Another criteria set for storytelling, with great relevance to this research, is Peter Lloyds (2000), derived from his examinations of the stories told between members of design teams during the process of designing. They are as follows: 1) *it can be interpreted or read*, 2) *different narrative viewpoints can be included*, 3) *there is a sense of closure; a definite ending*, and 4) *a name can be invented that references the complex of action*. Although these criteria have a relevance, they must still be viewed critically as the context of a design pitch is different to the verbal exchange of stories during the process of designing. With respect to the first criterion, a design pitch can include visual imagery as well as verbal exchange, and therefore can be modified to simply 'it can be interpreted'. The third criterion states that there should be a definite ending, however, a pitch can be purposefully left open, especially when a concept requires further development. Therefore, in a design pitch scenario, it may not be necessary to fulfill this criterion. The second and fourth criteria are wholly relevant, and resonate with Bruner's (1990); a narrative viewpoint can constitute the narrator's perspective, and a name given to the pitch can reference this interpretation/perspective.

It is the combination of these criteria sets that this research uses to define storytelling at the design pitch. The specific criteria are set out as follows:

- The goal is to present a design concept(s)
- There is an order to events of the design concept in use, OR states of the design concept's development
- The design concept must have a human user who the story is privy to
- The design concept must reflect the interpretation(s)/perspective(s) of the designer or design team

## 2. Determining Desirable Impacts at the Design Pitch

In order to think more strategically about approaching storytelling at the design pitch, it is important to establish what impacts we want to achieve. The following section of this paper identifies four key impacts and outlines what is already known about achieving them through storytelling approach.

### 2.1 Delivering Understanding

In the context of this research, delivering understanding can relate to: an acknowledgment of the origin of a design concept, key principles guiding its development (both in terms of form and function) and how a user interacts with the concept. It is in no dispute that an understanding of the design concept is required on some level in order for an individual to become invested in it.

Madsen and Nielsen (2010) argue that when a design team creates persona scenarios, shared understandings develop (including understandings of issues driving concept development, and the way in which it should confront them in terms of its form and/or function). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the use of persona scenarios during the design pitch also has the potential to aid in the achievement of these understandings in the audience. Comparably, Quesenbery and Brooks (2010) suggest sharing the stories of intended users during concept development can align understandings; again in terms of the issues driving concept development, and the way in which it should confront them in terms of its form and/or function. Both believe that the alignment of these understandings aids the design process, providing justification for a focus on 'Delivering Understanding'.

Additional justification for this focus can be seen when taking a broader psychological view. Noted psychologist Carl Bereiter (2002) claims that an understanding of an object implies an ability to think and use concepts to deal adequately with that object. In the instance of a design pitch, the object is a concept, therefore it can be reasoned that a design pitch (a presentation of a concept) is in fact a presentation of an understanding in itself.

Finally, vindication for having 'Delivering Understanding' as a focus in this research is also apparent when looking at literature that suggests conflicting storytelling approaches for achieving this impact. There are sources that suggest grounding stories in experiences based on real life situations promote understanding (Madsen and Nielsen, 2010, Quesenbery and Brooks, 2010), and those which arguably favour a more creative, abstract approach in promoting understanding (Adamson et al., 2006, Blas, 2012, DeLarge, 2004). Focusing on this impact will uncover a more considered appreciation of how one might achieve the delivery of an understanding in pitching a concept, and indeed when one approach may be favored over the other.

## 2.2 Demonstrating Value

In the context of this research, demonstrating value can be seen as an extension of delivering understanding; a situation where the understanding developed leads to a belief that the value proposition of the design concept is worthwhile. Again, it is not disputed that a belief in the worthiness of the design concept's value proposition is required for an individual to become invested in it.

It can be seen that 'Demonstrating Value' is justifiable as an area of inquiry within this research study when considering philosophies surrounding the term 'value'. Of paramount interest is the notion of instrumental and intrinsic value, a concept first written about by Plato (2003) in his Socratic dialogue 'The Republic' in the year 380 BC.

To summarise; something that has instrumental value can be used to acquire something of value and something that has intrinsic value is judged to be valuable in itself (Debreu, 1972). So for example, a million pounds has instrumental value as it can be used to obtain things and experiences that potentially have a value, whether those things or experiences have value is a matter of judgment; if someone desires the ability to play the piano, then they may view the ability that others have to play the piano as intrinsically valuable and therefore they may decide to pay for piano lessons. If we consider products and services, it becomes apparent that they can have both instrumental and intrinsic value, for example; a wedding ring has intrinsic value as it signifies a commitment to another person but it is also necessary to perform the act of marriage and so has instrumental value also. Similarly, an airline service for a business class flight can have intrinsic value as it provides a relaxing experience for a passenger during their travels, but it can also have instrumental value if they are being transported to their holiday destination. Smith (2007) proposes that when developing new

products and services, the creation of value is a critical task. It can therefore be reasoned that when a design pitch is observed, value judgements will be made both instrumentally and intrinsically; does its function serve a purpose (instrumental value) and is its form desirable (intrinsic value).

As well as 'Delivering Understanding', the persona scenario discussed by Madsen and Neilsen (2010) can also have impact in terms of 'Demonstrating Value'. A persona scenario has a specific structure; the story describes a persona's character (the user of the design concept), their dilemma and how the design concept helps them to overcome it. Should this dilemma resonate with its audience, the persona scenario has the potential to foster an emotional connection to the design concept, and will have demonstrated the apparent value of the design concept. This constitutes a clear attempt at the communication of instrumental value.

Similarly, DeLarge (2004) reinforces the use of experiential stories when discussing design concepts as he believes that they demonstrate the results of 'good' design; influencing perspectives and enabling innovations. If something is said to have value because it is 'good', value has been attributed intrinsically. For example, it can be seen as 'good' to be happy, and so if a design concept embodies happiness it has intrinsic value. Therefore, discussing experiential stories has the potential to communicate intrinsic values.

From these literary digests, it can be seen that a preoccupation with 'Demonstrating Value' is justifiable as it appears that there is a tendency to discuss design concepts in terms of instrumental and intrinsic value, a pattern that by logical reasoning will be apparent during the delivery and observation of a design pitch.

## 2.3 Stimulating Critique

In the context of this research, stimulating critique denotes opening up critical conversations about how a design concept has, and should be, developed (there is not an emphasis on negative criticism). The focus on achieving this impact evolved from a widely acknowledged belief that the more capable an organisation is of having critical discussion about a design concept, the more likely they are to embrace the idea and 'take the product to market'.

In their research, Schön and Wiggins (2006) demonstrate that examining the subtle evolution in a series of design artefacts (such as sketches) can reveal the critical dialogue shared by the design team during concept development, and the key choices they made about its development. If such design artefacts feature during the storytelling in a design pitch, it can be reasoned that the audience is invited to engage in these critical dialogues. Schön and Wiggins (2006) believe that stimulating these critical discussions is necessary for the development of a design concept, providing further justification for adopting this focus. Madsen and Neilsen (2010) suggest that persona scenarios can also help develop design concepts, as they invite discussion around how best to affect behaviour through the intervention of a product or service (Turner, 2008). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that this type of critical discussion is crucial for the decision making process during concept development.

It is also important to acknowledge that with respect to pitching concepts in organisations, being inconsistent with existing brand stories can arouse debate and discussion through challenging the status quo (Quesenberry and Brooks, 2010). However, it has also been suggested that this may come at the price of undervaluing the design concepts (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010). Again, providing further justification for focusing on 'Stimulating Critique' when examining the impact of a design pitch, as incongruent notions exist in current literature relating to this topic.

## 2.4 Encouraging More Holistic Thinking

In the context of this research, more holistic thinking denotes the development of alternative viewpoints in relation to the principles governing the development of a design concept (relating to both form and/or function). The focus on achieving this impact evolved from an understanding that in organisations people often adopt disparate or conflicting viewpoints in relation to concept development, and often need to see 'the bigger picture' in order for the design process to become unhindered (Duarte, 2012, Forman, 2013).

Organisational management strategist Denning (2007, pp. 110-111) argues that storytelling is a vehicle for eliciting cultural change as it has been used to give organisations' employees more holistic outlooks with respect to their roles:

- Narratives are more likely to be effective than abstract communications, because this is how human beings think and make decisions, and because it simulates the emotional significance of experiential learning.
- Indirect methods are more likely to be effective than direct methods, because they leave it up to the audience to make up their own minds rather than having opinions forced upon them.

There are several implications that these declarations have with respect to the research presented in this paper. Firstly, a design pitch may require abstract communication, as a human narrative surrounding an imagined concept may not yet exist. This poses a difficulty in challenging the beliefs of the audience with respect to various aspects of a design concept, perhaps most significantly a justification for its existence. Secondly, a design pitch does not occur informally, again an attribute that Denning (2007) identifies as a barrier to helping others adopt alternative viewpoints.

Opposing this are Adamson et al. (2006) reflections on storytelling in healthcare organisations, in particular how change was driven in the San Juan Regional Medical Centre. In this case, an analogy of the medical centre's infrastructure stimulated a change in employees' attitudes towards their job roles, improving internal relations. Each job role at the centre was compared to the characters in an Indiana Jones film. If we apply this notion to a design pitch, where analogous communication is commonplace, it would seem to suggest that storytelling at the design pitch is well placed for encouraging people to think in alternative ways.

It is therefore reasonable to focus on 'Encouraging More Holistic Thinking' when examining the impacts of the design pitch, as designers often wish to promote alternative viewpoints, but also because there are conflicting strategies for achieving this.

## 3. Case Examples

Now that desirable impacts at the design pitch have been defined and justified, the method and various cases used to examine them will be presented.

### 3.1 Unilever and Accenture

Unilever and Accenture both operate on a global level, selling products and services to consumers on an international scale. Unilever houses over four hundred brands in the food and hygiene market sectors. Accenture offers management consulting, technological services and outsourcing across all industries and business functions.

Unilever's Household Care department and Laundry department (based in their Port Sunlight Research and Development plant) have worked with a number of designers, in both university and consultancy settings. Many of their employees have made up audience members of design pitches where storytelling approaches have been employed to communicate design concepts. Interview transcriptions with six members of these teams provided the data for the first two case studies relevant to the research discussed in this paper. In total over thirty-five design pitches were discussed in these two cases.

Accenture's London-based Innovation centre hosts workshops aimed at teaching their clients how to innovate to meet the changing needs of their consumers. Accenture delivers this service in part by employing design consultancies to pitch product and service concepts, many of which have used storytelling formats. Interview transcripts with two audience members of these pitches provides the data for the third case study. In total fifteen design pitches were discussed delivered by fifteen different London based consultancies.

Both of these organisations represented appropriate cases for this research study as they actively seek the employment of designers, and openly encourage pitching through storytelling modes and mediums. Due to their diverse and global scale of operations, it is likely that many industries would find a parallel to these cases.

## 4. Discussion

A thematic analysis was used to code the interview transcriptions in order to establish the more significant relationships between storytelling approach and impact in the cases examined (Saldña, 2013). The ensuing discussion describes the most commonly occurring relationships drawn, and a key case example to illustrate them.

### 4.1 Acknowledging User Perspectives and/or Cultural Beliefs

One pitch, discussed in the Unilever Household Care case study, presented a concept for a spray applicator in the Chinese market. Throughout the story told at this pitch, different colours and their meanings in Chinese culture were shared with the audience, revealing motivations behind key decisions made in terms of colour selection on the product and pack. This quality was heralded by the audience as crucial to delivering understanding due to the contextual information it provided.

Another pitch, discussed in the Unilever Laundry case study, presented a concept for an easy use trigger mechanism. A story was told at this design pitch about using the spray from the point of view of an elderly person suffering with arthritis. Particular features of the trigger's design were showcased in the context of this user. Participants in this case explained that this approach was crucial to demonstrating the value of the design concept, as without belonging to the demographic in question, it is hard to appreciate the apparent value of such features.

These case examples are just two of many design pitches that suggest acknowledgments of user perspectives and cultural beliefs provide contextual information crucial in delivering understanding and demonstrating value.

### 4.2 Being Diverse/Different

Several design consultancies pitched a concept for a new digital justice service to a small team at Accenture's Innovation centre. One particular pitch discussed in this case study used animation in the style of 'Sin City' to present their concept. Interview participants were unanimous in declaring that



this pitch was most easily understood due to the fact that the diverse style of presentation fully engaged them throughout the pitch. The intrigue of this diverse approach led to a more memorable experience, providing the necessary condition for an understanding to develop.

In the Unilever Household Care case study, a number of designers presented packaging design concepts for household cleaning products that emphasised the scientific qualities of the cleaning solution. In discussing these pitches, interview participants emphasised that those using a typical PowerPoint format failed to demonstrate their value. It was reasoned that there is an expectation on designers to communicate ideas using methods that are seen as diverse or different to the audience. Pitches using more diverse/different storytelling techniques were seen as rarer, and therefore more valuable commodities of the organisation.

During the Unilever Laundry case study, a number of design pitches were delivered to communicate the science behind fabric conditioner. The intention of these pitches was to help the internal marketing team embrace an alternative way of promoting the product. Of the number of pitches discussed, only one was claimed to truly connect with the audience, in terms of getting them to see an alternative viewpoint. This particular pitch used stop-frame animation, where characters from Super Mario bros were used to represent particles, and an obstacle course was used to represent fabrics. The audience of these pitches proclaimed that this design pitch presented the concept in a novel way, encouraging them to take an alternative viewpoint.

These case excerpts are just three of many discussions that suggest being diverse/different in terms of storytelling mode and/or content provides the conditions necessary for: the delivery of understanding (due to it being intriguing and memorable), the demonstration of value (due to it having the quality of rarity), and the encouragement of more holistic thinking (due to its novelty).

### 4.3 Detailing Concept Development

In discussion of design pitches during the Accenture case study, interview participants explain that when developmental stages of a design concept are revealed throughout storytelling, and linked to criteria set out in the initial brief, a clearer rationale is provided for the origin of a design concepts features. Bringing transparency to the design process through storytelling is highlighted as crucial to developing a clear understanding of the design concept.

Further to this, during the Unilever Household Care case study, interview participants explained that when a design concept is discussed in terms of its evolution, critical dialogue can flow. This was because the products evolution was presented through revealing the insights of the design team and then relating them to particular features of the product, providing a set of judgements that the audience could agree or disagree with. It transpired that in this case, the more familiar the audience was with the rationale behind the developmental decisions made, the more capable the audience was in having critical discussion around the design concept.

These case excerpts are just two of many discussions that suggest including details of concept development when storytelling at the design pitch is fundamental in delivering an understanding and stimulating critique, due to the transparency and familiarity brought to the design process (Causby, 2013).

### 4.4 Imagery, in particular Analogy

One pitch discussed in the Unilever Household Care case study used the analogy of an eagle to introduce their design concept for a trigger application of a cleaning product. The use of this analogy awakened the curiosity of the audience: some compared the shape of the eagle's beak to the nozzle

of the trigger, some likened the way it flies to the spray emitted, and some even believed the eagles poise inspired the shape of the bottle and its presence on the supermarket shelf. In fact, the analogy of the eagle had been used to make a statement that this trigger applicator is superior among others, similarly to the eagle and other birds in the animal kingdom. The curiosity that this analogy awoke, led to abstracted thinking in the audience members, stimulating critical debate around concept development.

As discussed previously, one pitch belonging to the Accenture case study used animation in the style of 'Sin City' to communicate a concept for a digital justice service. As well as making this pitch intriguing and memorable (and therefore helping to deliver understanding), it was also earmarked as encouraging more holistic thinking. In this instance the curiosity to rationalise the relevance of this analogous format led to the adoption of alternative viewpoints, bringing in to question what the primary objectives of a criminal justice system should be.

These case examples are just two of many design pitches that suggest imagery, in particular analogy, is useful for stimulating critique and encouraging holistic thinking, due to the natural curiosity of the human mind and the abstracted thinking that ensues as a result.

## 5. The Storytelling Impact-Approach Framework

As alluded to in the introduction, the next focus for storytelling should be the design pitch. There is a significant gap in knowledge in terms of understanding how storytelling can have impact in this context. This is most apparent when conducting literary searches on online platforms such as the British Library; using the term 'design pitch', and/or 'storytelling' and the 'design pitch' show little to no relevant texts. Further to this, storytelling's relationship with design has been explored in relation to the process of designing, and so a focus on pitching seems a natural progression. Finally, when considering existing knowledge relevant to storytelling at the design pitch, conflicting ideas are promoted (as detailed earlier on in this paper).

The following figure illustrates the findings of the research study this paper explores, summarising the key relationships described in the previous section.

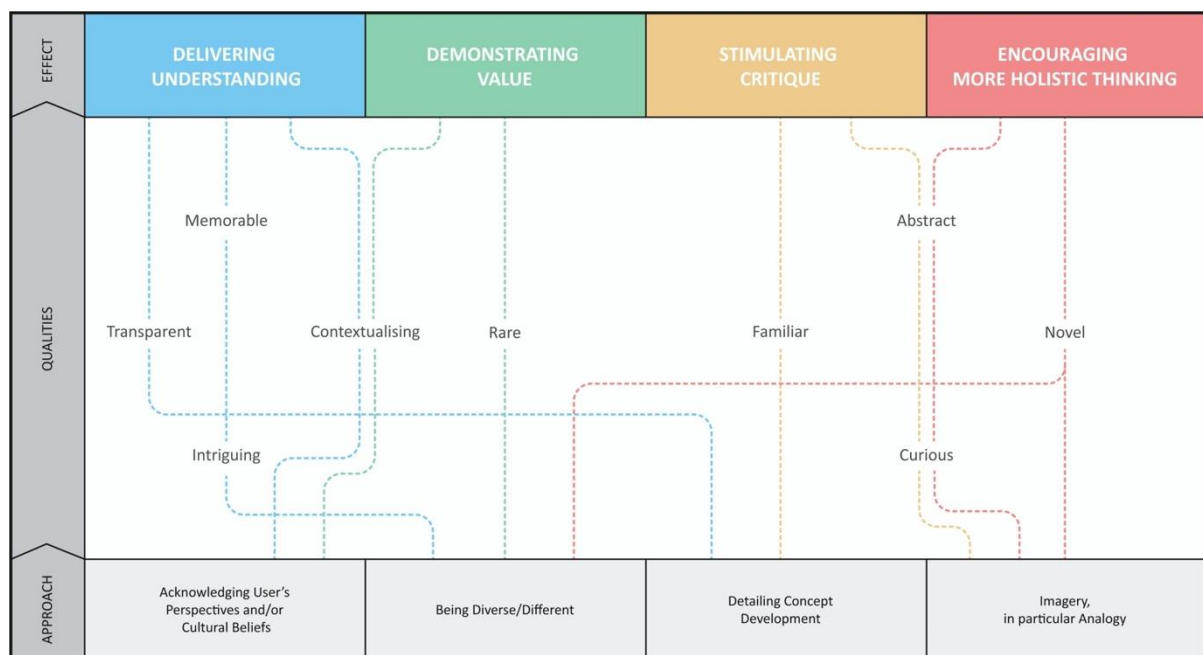


Figure 1: Design Pitch Storytelling: The Impact-Approach Framework

The key pathways illustrated in the framework relating storytelling approaches to their impacts can be described as follows:

- Acknowledging user perspectives and cultural beliefs in a story told during a design pitch can help to deliver an understanding of a design concept and also demonstrate its value through providing contextualisation.
- Using a diverse or different mode when telling a story during a design pitch can intrigue and therefore aid memory in order to help deliver an understanding of a design concept over time. It can also attribute a value of rarity, allowing it to be viewed as a valuable piece of communication for the organisation. Using diverse or different content in telling a story (such as an original analogy) can also achieve the above, but may also introduce novelty that encourages more holistic thinking about a design concept.
- Detailing concept development in telling a story during a design pitch can bring familiarity to a design process allowing the audience to engage in critical discussion around the design concept. The transparency to the design process that this storytelling approach can bring can also encourage more holistic thinking around the design concept.
- Using imagery, in particular analogy when telling a story during a design pitch invites a curiosity to understand the appropriateness of said analogy. Often this requires thinking about the design concept in an abstracted way that has proven to help stimulate critique and encourage more holistic thinking around a design concept.

This research has identified the important role that storytelling can play at the design pitch, whilst showcasing an understanding of the working relationship between a number of designers and organisations. Rather than providing the audience with a generalisable set of rules (something that you cannot claim with respect to storytelling approach), a higher degree of consciousness is promoted when pitching design concepts, through encouraging a reflection on the information presented.

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**David Parkinson** is preoccupied with the relationship between storytelling and design; aiming to build an understanding of the role storytelling plays at the design pitch. His book chapter in the DESIS publication 'Pearl Diver: Designer as Storyteller' is one of several publications on this topic.

**Laura Warwick's** primary research interest is the role of Service Design in the third sector. Her work to date has supported many national charities such as Mind and Age UK, helping them to secure millions of pounds' worth of funding.